

Sunk Cost by VerityR

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Summary:

Try as she may to be mature and understanding, there were some things Nancy simply had to be a seventeen-year-old girl about. And her mother asking about her love life was one of them.

Sunk Cost

Her mom was trying. On some level, Nancy knew this. When she reminded Nancy to wear gloves in February, it wasn't meant to be condescending. When she asked Nancy if she'd gotten into a fight with Cathy, she wasn't trying to pry.

On days when Nancy helped her mom cook dinner, when they joked around and maybe rewatched *Gone With the Wind*, she could admit even admit to liking her mom. Nancy knew she'd rather be the daughter of Karen Wheeler, concerned mother and baker of sympathy casseroles, than one of those moms who bought beer for her kids in a misguided ploy for approval.

Still. Try as she may to be mature and understanding, there were some things Nancy simply had to be a seventeen-year-old girl about. And her mother asking about her love life was one of them.

"So, I was on the phone with Joyce Byers this afternoon," Karen began, with a practiced nonchalance. "And she seemed to think Jonathan might be over here. Why do you think that was?"

Of course this conversation was happening in the car, with no hope of escape. Her mother had suggested they go to the mall to pick out new dresses for Thanksgiving. Nancy had seized the opportunity. Her wardrobe was seeming very... *pastel* lately.

She'd been had.

Holding in a sigh, Nancy weighed her response. Her impulse was to lie and avoid a longer conversation. But there didn't seem to be much point to it.

"Probably because we're seeing each other now."

Karen's eyes widened, probably surprised to have received the truth with so little probing.

"Well, all right." Karen paused, then smiled. "Jonathan's very nice, always driving Will around like that."

Idly, Nancy considered how much it would hurt to fling herself out of the door and roll away.

“I did think you and Steve were, I don’t know, going steady, but— ”

“ Mom . ”

“Whatever you kids say, then. When I was in high school, a year was an awfully long time to date a boy— ”

“If you’re going to call me a big slut or whatever, you can just come out and say it. I get enough of it at school, okay?”

Her mother turned and looked at her for longer than was frankly safe for the other drivers on the road.

“People are talking about you at school? Who? Steve?”

Now, Nancy did sigh. “No one. Not Steve. It’s really not a big deal.”

“How about I decide if it’s a big deal for myself? Okay, Nancy?”

Nancy sank into her seat. “I don’t know what *you’re* so upset about.”

“Contrary to what you kids seem to think,” Karen said, voice tight, “I do have a vested interest in your happiness. Why didn’t you tell me about any of this?”

Because I would have to edit the story pretty heavily around the existence of monsters, parallel universes, and my involvement with both? Because the last time I talked to you about my sex life it was because cops investigating my best friend’s “disappearance” suggested that my sluttiness was what drove her away? Because I thought you would be disappointed that I didn’t try harder to make it work, like you do with Dad?

Nancy shrugged.

“If you’re happy, Nancy,” her mother said gently, “then I’m happy for you. I only want to understand.”

She considered trying to explain, though she wasn’t sure she did herself.

"It felt like..." Nancy chewed her lip. "You know the idea of the sunk cost fallacy?"

Karen looked like she was trying to hide her amusement. "Why don't you explain it?"

"The idea is that people have an inherent sense of loss aversion. Like, remember the time Dad got those Pacers tickets and he insisted we all go even though we all had the flu and none of us care about basketball?"

Her mother grimaced. "Your father—"

Nancy held up a hand. "I'm not complaining. I'm explaining. Even though the money was already gone and none of us had fun and Mike bitched about it for the next six months, Dad felt like he had to get his money's worth."

Karen nodded. "And this is how you feel about Steve?"

"More or less."

"But what was the initial investment, then?"

Nancy blinked. "Huh?"

"In your analogy, there has to be a cost, right? Well, what did your relationship with Steve cost that you felt you were obligated to stay with him for so long?"

The answer was Barb, of course. Her relationship with Steve had cost Barb her life. But that was another part of the story Nancy couldn't explain. It was truly so stupid. She had explained it all to Steve, of course. Once he'd seen the monster, he might as well know the rest.

Mike and his friends had told that new girl, Max, for no apparent reason except they all probably had crushes on her. And yet Nancy couldn't (or wouldn't) explain anything to her own mother. She envied Jonathan then, ridiculously. For all the pain the Byers had gone through, at least they'd gone through it together.

"I don't know," Nancy said, finally. "Maybe it was a bad analogy."

Karen didn't look convinced. But they didn't speak about it again until that night.

"Tell Jonathan he's invited for dinner on Friday," her mother declared, apropos of nothing as she peeled potatoes.

"Can Will come too?" Mike asked, before slicing his finger open with a peeler. "Ow, fuck me!"

"Michael!"

"Can you stop him from bleeding all over our dinner?" Nancy asked, rolling her eyes. Honestly, she was sort of thankful for the double dose of distraction Mike was providing. Will would be as an effective buffer as any.

When Band-Aids were located and Mike had been convinced he still had to help with dinner, Karen got back to business.

"Yes, tell Will he's welcome anytime." She looked slyly to Nancy. "He might actually take your father off the offensive. I'm sure Jonathan doesn't want to answer a thousand questions about the future and college and all that."

"Jonathan wants to go to NYU," Nancy said, automatically.

"Does he?" Her mother looked a little too excited for Nancy's comfort.

"For photography," she said, still unsure why she was giving her mother this ammo. This whole 'actually talking to her mom' thing was getting out of control.

"Photography!" Her eyes sparkled. "I wonder if he'd be willing to volunteer for the Snow Ball, it'd be so sweet if everyone could have their photo taken..."

"Not that kind of photography, Mom."

"A picture is a picture," Karen declared happily, sliding the peeled potatoes into a pot of water. "We'll see what Jonathan has to say about it on Friday."

Nancy laughed.

“And what is so funny?”

“Nothing,” Nancy assured her, “I love you, is all.”

Her mother still looked slightly lost, but she smiled all the same.

“Love you too, sweetie. Now, go set the table. And wash your hands, please!”

Nancy snorted. But she did what her mother asked.

Author's Note:

A day late, but I hope you enjoy it! I love Karen... so much. Prayer circle that she gets to do more than get hit on by a teenager next season.